



Korn Gallery

Dorothy Young Center for the Arts
Drew University
Madison, NJ 07940

Jonathan Shahn

"Selected Heads"

Curators:

Katherine Bitgood, Rachel Cohen,
Kay Halverson, Rachel Posner and
Carolina Sopper

February 4 - March 15, 2011

Opening Reception:

February 4, 5:30 - 7:30 PM

Gallery Hours:

Tuesday - Friday 12:30 - 4:00 PM

Selected Weekends and by Appointment

For more information please call: (973) 408-3758

www.drew.edu/korngallery

Return Service Requested

"Middle-Sized Head on Base I", 1996, Wood, Paint, Marker, 19 1/2"x9"x12", photo: Wojtek Naczas.

Selected Heads



When it comes to art, I am really drawn to pieces that do not make sense at first glance. Artwork is supposed to have a certain story or emotion behind it, but to me that can only be achieved when a piece is vague. It becomes more intriguing to me. It lets my imagination wonder and create possibilities that no one else knows about. I feel that the sculptures and drawings produced by Jonathan Shahn articulate that beautiful vagueness that makes me feel alive in the contemporary art scene. Even though there are major differences between each piece, there is still a constant visual theme: the handiwork of the artist. His work captures a being in time—each piece had a specific trait of its model, but the model has long since been forgotten. The markings, cuts, chips, strokes and style of an individual piece come from the direct hands of the artist, and the works are tied together into a community of sculpted and drawn figures.

Kay Halverson
Drew University '11

When viewing the head in isolation from the body, it provides a haunting and violent connotation. It is important to note that these works were all created without an individual person in mind and have been considered by Jonathan Shahn as “imaginary portraits.” The gesture seen in these selected heads and their long, curvilinear forms suggests a sleepy demeanor, evocative of the endless sleep of death. Their detachment evokes a disturbance in the viewer, making them significant in their isolation, without the rest of a human body or extremities. The head itself is reminiscent of the human consciousness.

As viewers, we associate and identify with the human form, creating a type of unmistakable attachment to the inherently familiar subject matter. Each of these works uses the body fragmented to communicate a distinctly individual and personal narrative.

Rachel Cohen
Drew University '12

In his wooden sculptures, Jonathan Shahn breaks down the barrier between process and product. Indentations on the surface reference the carving tools used to transform blocks of wood, and these marks evoke the imperfections in tone and texture of human skin. Shahn leaves the bases of his wooden heads largely geometric but uses chalk or paint to articulate a spine or neckline, or to indicate plans or measurements for further modification. As such, the artist's hand in the work is inextricable; interestingly, the presence of the viewer is also certain. In his heads in “portals”—post and lintel constructions framing the heads—the viewer is encouraged to experience the sculpture frontally. The portal both confines the figure, obstructing the viewer from wholly understanding it visually, while simultaneously inviting interpretation of its function on a more intimate level.

Katherine Bitgood
Drew University '11

“This one almost looks like it means something, doesn't it?” Jonathan Shahn poses as if he himself were looking at the sculpture for the first time. He is as much serious as he is teasing, and definitely not waiting for my answer or interpretation. He has instead invited me to look.

The bronze armature pieces exemplify the blurred lines of intentionality and temporality found in Mr. Shahn's work. The anguish or gore that one is tempted to read in the cracked eyeball of one of the sculpture's faces was born not of a premeditated plan, but rather of a model who failed to return after the third sitting, leaving the piece to dry and crack, or simply a moment in which the other half of the face loosed its grip on the armature and crumpled off. The decision to give the armature continued presence was made when Shahn realized that having it in view during the sculpting process influences how the piece turns out and becomes an important part of the sculpture. Further, the few chunks of discarded clay now littering the base confound the viewer's sense of temporality, as the casting into bronze of the whole piece has disallowed any chance for the artist to return and pick them up. What was a sculpture of a person has become a sculpture of a sculpture.

The way Shahn looks at what is happening and how it is being perceived as he creates a sculpture gives the pieces their presence and power.

Carolina Sopper
New York University '11



Most portraitists typically work solely from a sitter. Jonathan Shahn breaks from this tradition to experiment with “imaginary portraits.” The series of imaginary heads are a distillation of all the variations of the heads he has observed over time, a fusion of that which we recognize as from life and that which is derived from his imagination. Through these imaginary portraits he seeks a balance between the actual and the imagined which can quickly lose a visual vocabulary. Through the artist's eye he has merged these individuals together to create almost familial relations through the entire body of work. Shahn studied diverse groups of physical characteristics to create a new visual lexicon connecting this entire category of works into the creation of a family. The life of the mind, creation, and the development of the conceived is housed in the head. What makes these imaginary heads so distinctive and special is that anyone can approach a sculpture and find a trait that they can make a personal connection with.

Rachel Posner
Drew University '11

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Jonathan Shahn is exhibiting figural sculptures spanning a variety of mediums, including plaster, wood, and bronze, as well as drawings. The subjects of his heads and busts range from friends and neighbors to portraits of figures from his imagination. Some sculptures are contained in wooden portals that demarcate a distinctly frontal orientation to the figure, whereas others are viewed in the round on solid bases or armatures. Shahn's explicit infusion of process into his pieces, evidenced in the rough surface texture of his wooden busts or in the chunks of discarded clay cast in bronze, suggests a life cycle of figural sculpture. The marks on the surface remind the viewer of a figure's past, its transformation from the raw material into its present state of being, and penciled gestures indicate a figure's future, its continued growth to be determined by the artist.

In his career, Jonathan Shahn has had many solo and group exhibitions in the United States and Europe. Shahn taught sculpture and drawing at the Tyler School in Rome, Boston University, the Maryland Institute and currently teaches at the Art Student's League of New York. He lives and works in Roosevelt, New Jersey.

Images courtesy Wojtek Naczas

For more information, please contact:
973.408.3758
ghilllco@drew.edu

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